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ABSTRACT

The subject of regionalization or the consolidation of schools has been a major issue of discussion and educational research for the past 15 years. A fact that has come out of the research is that consolidation is expensive. Yet, some observers continue to recommend consolidating the remaining school districts. When schools are closed, children have to be bussed at a tremendous cost. In order to accommodate the larger school districts, land has to be bought and schools built, which could cost billions of dollars. Additional staff would also need to be hired to fill these new school buildings. In terms of human costs, larger schools are conducive to depersonalization, which leads to student dropout and drug or alcohol problems. Regionalization would also disenfranchise the schools from their communities by drastically reducing the number of school board members. Additionally, it is almost impossible to fairly distribute one budget among several school districts involved; some always feel shortchanged. An alternative to regionalization is to be creative and improve the things that we have and work together toward common goals. We need to quit comparing our educational system to Japan or Russia; our system and the needs of our students are different. We need to think before we leap (or spend) and not jump on every "educational bandwagon." (LP)

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by

Edwin J. Hallanan, M.Ed.

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Regionalization - Deja Vu Again?

by

Edwin J. Hallanan, M.Ed.

It seems as if the subject of "Regionalization", or the consolidation of schools, has been a major subject of discussion for at least half of the 30 years I have been in the "Education Business".

In science, one sets up the hypothesis, examines the criteria, correlates the data, draws a conclusion, and the answer comes out the same every time. In education, people seem to do the same study over and over again hoping for a different conclusion. It's a little like banging your head against a wall to relieve your headache. The simple fact that has come out of every study I have seen thus far is that it is too damn expensive! Period! (Hopefully, this simple conclusion will help a lot of people save money by not having any more studies!)

Now, as a good educator, I know no one will just believe this simple statement without further embellishment, so here it is. If one were to take the conclusions of the latest "Blue Ribbon" Panel we would "squash" our current 600+ districts into 250. Let's see what it would take to do this.

1. TRANSPORTATION - All of those little schools where students now walk would have to be shut down and become one more decaying building in the center of town while the students are bussed to their bright shiny new campus.

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EFFECT: Multiply the current cost of school bus transportation by at least a multiple of 4. I only need to take a short ride over the bridge to Delaware to see the effect of this. Kids are being bussed all over the map at tremendous cost. My son, Eddie, lives over there and his 2 kids are on split sessions, have to share textbooks and, in general, consider it to be a horrendous system compared to even the worst of New Jersey's schools.

2. SHINY NEW CAMPUSES - Since there are no districts big enough to currently house the 350 districts we are planning to eliminate, we would have to go out and buy thousands of acreas of land and build hundreds of new buildings. Now, as far as cost estimates go I believe mine are as good as anyone elses' since I have been involved with school buildings for all of my 30 years in the business. Part of the "Blue Ribbon" projection was to spend 6 billion to fix up 2,200 dilapidated buildings. Of course if we were to consolidate we wouldn't have to fix so many up, thereby saving a few billion. Then we could just board them up and blight a few more town centers.

Based on my vast knowledge of the construction industry (Yes, I worked for 10 years in construction in New York City and even helped build the Colliseum), and of the Real Estate business (I've had a real estate license for 28 years) I would conservatively estimate that we could pull it off for about 18 billion if we spent cautiously.

3. STAFFING - One scientific fact that always seems to be true is that "Nature Abhors a Vacuum". In other words when you build a large, shiny new building with lots of space and many offices there is an absolute necessity to fill them with people, whether you need them or not! I have noticed, over the years, that this becomes rather costly.

I would not even care to hazard a guess as to the ultimate cost of this. Every study I have ever seen on this subject has always come out less that the true cost. The true cost seems to be pegged to the degree of megalomania of the leadership of the school at hiring time.

4. DEPERSONALIZATION - I can't begin to tell you the cost of this either. All I know is that it costs a lot in human terms. In my mind "Small Can Be Beautiful" and "Bigness Creates Badness". The true answer to the dropout problem is to make school such a pleasant place to be that no one wishes to miss it. Every child has a "Gift" and a "Talent" if we take the time and initiative to develop them. Every child is "Special". When schools get too big and impersonal many of these children become lost in mass confusion. Many turn to drugs or alcohol to escape and reduce the pressure they feel.

I am old enough to remember when the Russians launched "Sputnic" in the late '50's and we were told that we were far behind them in science and math. We made a

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great flourish in education about all this and then it died. We even brought in "Modern Math" and then it died. And now Russia is dead. I'm so glad we didn't catch up to them!

Today we are told we must catch up to Japan. We must become #1 in Science and Math by the year 2000 or else! It's "Deja Vu" all over again! (Those who ignore the lessons of history are bound to repeat them!!!)

I recently watched a T.V. show on Channel 12 about "Japan", narrated by Jane Seymore. It was quite revealing. It began by showing dozens of people in the central square in Tokyo waiting patiently for the light to turn green. No one dared to move until it changed. Severe punishment awaited anyone daring to cross ahead of time. Conversely, I thought back to my days of growing up in New York where the favorite game was playing "Beat the Light and Run on Red". It was very dangerous crossing with the green. You might be run over by a cab making an illegal turn.

The major educational point that I gleaned from the show was that the Japanese use the abacus for teaching math. That's the <u>real</u> reason they are so good in it. I would like to propose that we immediately begin to introduce math teaching by <u>abacus</u> nationwide.

There have also been numerous proposals for a longer school day and a longer school year such as they have in Japan. One of the primary reasons for this is because

they have no janitors in Japan and the kids have to spend a good part of the day cleaning the schools.

I would like to propose that we immediately fire all janitors and let the kids do all the work so that we can be just like Japan. By lenghtening the school year an extra month we could let the kids paint the classrooms as well in July. Think of the money we'll save too. We could use it to buy the abacuses and science kits.

5. DISENFRANCHISEMENT - "Out of sight, Out of Mind". The more remote we make our schools from the population they serve, the less involved the people will be with them. A lot is being talked about "Site Based Management" these days. Probably the ultimate in site based management was the one room schoolhouse. Regionalization would probably destroy what little bit of that we have left. There are currently about 6,000 school board members in the state. Regionalization would reduce that to 2,500 or less. The number of truly dedicated board members has been dwindling nationwide as it is. They are more and more being replaced by "single issue" board members who get on with one idea in mind and then get off when they can or can't accomplish it.

New Jersey is known as the "Local Control State". That may not be all bad compared to the "Out of Control" states I see around us.

6. BUDGETS - Most of the studies I have seen have also become bogged down in unravelling the complex fiscal

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questions that arise when one tries to compare the differences in tax rates, property taxes, property evaluation variations, and all of the other complex issues that create the financial makeup of each district. They are all different. It is almost impossible to draw up any one equasion to fit them all. This, in turn, makes it impossible to get any of the districts to agree on each other's arithmetic. Someone always feels shortchanged. Just look into the one aspect of regionalization we already have - Regional High Schools. The fun always begins when they try and pacify all the members of their sending districts on any given subject. There is wrangling all over the state in many of our regional high schools on so many trivial issues today that it is pitiful. Some of them seem to be coming apart at the seams. Some are looking for ways to split up and go their separate ways again. Think of what it would be like if we had 250 "Regionals".

I find it ludicrous to even think about spending $20 or $30 billion dollars for all this when our piddling amount of state aid has been cut one more time and we are told there isn't enough money to go around. We are told that our state revenues this year may fall a mere one or two billion dollars short and everyone seems to be in a panic. What shape would we be in if we were to "fully fund" these regionalization proposals?

7. WHAT CAN WE DO? - We do what we can! We make the best of what we have. We improve those things that we have, a little bit each day. We try and work together and quit bickering so damn much. If there's a problem we do our best to fix it. We try and take the long term view and not get caught up with the "Quick Fixes". We don't jump on every stupid "Educational Bandwagon" that comes down the pike and waste a ton of money only to find out it doesn't work. Think before we leap (or spend). Be positive. Follow the Golden Rule (if you know it). Quit being gloom and doomers. Realize this is America, not Japan or Russia. We don't have to copy anyone. We educate all children, not just a select handful like so many other countries do. We are rugged pioneers with individualistic spirits and will probably always cross when it says "Don't Walk" if no cars are coming. Hopefully, we will never be "A Nation of Sheep" corralled in regional pens.

Creativity is our strongest suit. Disney World and Disney Land are two of our greatest exports. They are based on art, music and a fanatical creative spirit that is uniquely American. Maybe we will never lead the world in certain categories, or maybe we do already. It all depends on whose statistics you care to read.

In conclusion, I would simply state that, "We have done so much, for so long, with so little, that we are now capable of doing almost anything with nothing."

If you'd like to see a school which was built in 1866, with a real bell tower, and wooden floors, then I'd like to invite you all to visit my Shiloh School. I love it! It's terrific! Everyone here seems to love it too! We even have site based management! Our students do well here and in high school. They seem to be happy.

The Shiloh Board of Education

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About the Author

Edwin J. (Ed) Hallanan, M.Ed., is currently serving as Chief School Administrator in Shiloh, N.J. (Cumberland County). He came out of retirement to do this. He spent 20 years as Superintendent of the Swedesboro-Woolwich Schools. Prior to that he was Supervisor of the Pemberton Township Schools. He previously taught self-contained 8th grade there. Prior to that he was a military instructor and journalist for 3 years at Fort Dix. His B.A. is from Pace University, N.Y.C. in the Social Sciences. His Masters Degree is from Rutgers University in Educational administration and Supervision. He is also involved in part-time educational consulting work.